

Voices from Maple Nation: Indigenous Women's Climate Summit

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Indigenous cultures of the U.S. Northeast are in the midst of a cultural revitalization. Among the hallmarks of this renaissance are a strengthening of forest-based practices that are at the heart of Indigenous cultures and identities (see, for example, Daigle et al. in this issue). Unfortunately, climate change and its impacts on forests represent a new and intensifying challenge to forests and Indigenous communities throughout the nation (Voggeser et al. 2013), including New England and New York (Baumfleck 2018, Janowiak et al. 2018).

Rising temperatures, altered precipitation regimes, changing frequency and severity of disturbances, increases in the incidence of pathogens and invasive species have profound implications for the forest resources on which Indigenous peoples rely (Bennett et al. 2014). Consequences for northeastern tribes include loss of access to important species as their habitats shift to places outside those where individuals and tribes currently have access, episodic and chronic shortages of plants and animals used for livelihood purposes, and asynchronies between phenological characteristics of cultural keystone species and ceremonies centered on them (Lake et al. 2018). In addition, animals and plants, including trees, are regarded by many Indigenous peoples as relatives that generously provide food, medicine, and other gifts to people (Kimmerer 2013) and forests are to be respected as the homes of these beings (Reo and Whyte 2012). Thus, the impacts of climate change on forest ecosystems and the species in them have spiritual ramifications for northeastern tribes in addition to their material and cultural consequences.

Native women have always played a central role in the extraordinary resilience of their communities despite centuries of political, social, and ecological upheaval. Climate change is yet another such great shift. In October 2016, *Voices From Maple Nation: Indigenous Women's Climate Summit* brought together some 50 women

from Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), and Wabanaki (eastern Algonquin) nations to discuss Native women's gifts and responsibilities as their families, communities, and the wider world confront the challenges of climate change. A small number of non-Native women also had the honor to attend, including the author. Convened by the State University of New York's Center for Native Peoples and the Environment and the US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service's Northern Research Station, the women at this summit in the Adirondack Mountains ranged in age from a few months to more than 8 decades. Cumulatively, they brought with them knowledge and experience from more than a dozen sovereign Indigenous nations and sources including anthropology, botany, fisheries, language, song, and story. The women's deliberations were supported by three men who brought essential gender balance and provided invaluable logistical support to the proceedings.

While the women (and men) hailed from many corners of the Northeast, we came together as Maple Nation. An important component of forests throughout the territories of the nations represented at the summit (Prasad et al. 2007-ongoing), sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) is an ecological and cultural keystone species in the region. Maple figures large in Indigenous stories and ceremonies, while maple syrup and sugar are important foods after the long, hungry months of winter. Further, maple is considered a leader among the trees by the Haudenosaunee people, highlighting the summit's purpose to explore Indigenous women's roles as leaders in responding to climate change. Unfortunately, sugar maple also is expected to be strongly affected by climate change, with its habitat shifting north of many of the nations present at the summit (Prasad et al. 2007-ongoing).

Over the course of four days, working sessions were inspired by ceremony, song, and story, while art and humor helped to keep minds open and creative. Among the questions that guided discussions were:

1. What changes related to climate change and environment do the women of Maple Nation already observe?
2. What are the threats to Indigenous communities posed by these changes? Does climate change also create openings and opportunities?
3. What gifts and responsibilities do Indigenous women bring to facing climate change threats?
4. How can these gifts be acknowledged and used on behalf of the world?

Responses to these questions were rich and varied beyond the scope of a brief newsletter article. I briefly summarize some of them here.

For the women at Voices from Maple Nation, climate change and its effects on forested landscapes already are evident. The losses are intimate, personal, and direct. Some food and medicine plants some are becoming increasingly hard to find when and/or where they are needed. Rising tick populations and increases in tick-borne illnesses create new risks for people engaged in traditional livelihood and cultural practices on the land. Rising temperatures are a particular hazard for elders, who are

important knowledge keepers and teachers of the next generation. These and other changes pose fundamental threats to food and health security, as well as Indigenous cultures.

At the same time, climate change likely will bring opportunities for adaptation. New species are arriving in Maple Nation from the south. Some of these are good food and medicine for the peoples where they come from and may be able to move into places and roles occupied by species being displaced by climate change.

The women of Maple Nation bring many gifts to responding to these challenges and opportunities. First and foremost is deep knowledge of how to survive change. Land-based practices and traditional teachings held by women will continue to be rich survival resources for the future, as they have been in the past. In addition, participants in Voices from Maple Nation noted both the compassion and fierce strength Indigenous women bring to acting on behalf of their families, communities, and Mother Nature.

Knowledge, experience, and love are powerful tools for honoring the special responsibility and authority of Indigenous women as creators and sustainers of life. Among the strategies for supporting and strengthening those tools, Voices from Maple Nation seeks to serve as the catalyst for a network of northeastern Indigenous women working on responses to climate change. Small grants already have supported projects by women in the Great Lakes region, Maine, New Brunswick, and New York.

Indigenous peoples are observing firsthand the early, fine-scale effects of altered temperature and precipitation regimes on northeastern forests. As these effects become increasingly evident, Indigenous women are emerging as leaders in responding to them. The women of Maple Nation are mobilizing the wisdom and experience their ancestors drew on to survive millennia of changes such as altered forest structure and composition following the Little Ice Age (Drobyshev et al. 2017) and vast changes in biophysical and social landscapes resulting from colonization (Cronon 1983). At the same time, they are bringing that wisdom into the 21st Century through social media and other technologies that allow them to share knowledge and inspire action far beyond their own communities.

Indigenous women recognize that their wisdom and experience has much to offer

the world at large and they are ready to step up to the challenge (see Box). Their interventions do not stop at sounding an alarm. Among the climate change responses already led by the women of Maple Nation are programs to ensure sustainable management of medicinal species and inspire people to build meaningful relationships with regional forests, lands, and waters. Foresters have much to learn from these efforts, as well as opportunities to contribute as allies through respectful engagement and support.

Box: Voices from Maple Nation Declaration, developed by participants in the 2016 Indigenous Women's Climate Summit.

Bozho! Nyawenha skanoh! Boozhoo! Chwent Awwskenehe! Shekon Sewakwekon! Kulahsihkulpa!

We send greetings in the Indigenous languages spoken across the territories we call home, the expansive northeastern forests of Maple Nation that we share with our plant and animal relatives who are in need of our voices.

We are indigenous women of Maple Nation: grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and babies, gathered from many Indigenous Nations from the four directions. We come from different traditions, languages, roles and cultures. Yet, we all share in the traditional care-taking responsibility for the Maple Nation bioregion in which we live; the forests, medicines, fish, and wildlife, sacred rivers, springs, lakes and shorelines. We offer our gratitude for these generous gifts of Mother Earth.

The Haudenosaunee people view Maples as a leader among trees, for the ways they sustain us. They are ecological and cultural keystones in our cultures and a symbol of our region. Yet accelerating climate change threatens Maple Nation and the web of ecological relationships of which we are all a part.

Changing temperatures and unpredictable seasons place maple forests and all of our non-human relatives at risk, when change comes faster than they can adapt. How will they regenerate in a world out of balance? Our plant medicines are moving away from us even as new species arrive. When shall we hold our ceremonies if the seasons they honor shift? How shall we tend our gardens and gather our foods, if the rains are unpredictable, if the temperatures wither the plants and the gardeners alike? What songs will we sing if the beings they sing of are gone? As we witness the suffering of Mother Earth, the emotional toll is high. The lands, waters, peoples and all beings of Maple Nation are suffering together. What we do to land, we do to ourselves. We feel their pain.

As Indigenous women, we carry special gifts and responsibilities to care for Mother Earth. Women are honored in our cultures as givers of life and caretakers of the land and water, gifted with special connection to the sources of life -- to seed, soil, water, and plants. Our work is guided by the wisdom of our ancestors and the expectations of our children. We stand together with shared purpose, strength and knowledge inspired by the presence of our first women, Grandmother Moon and Mother Earth. Our gentle gifts of compassion and healing are paired with fierce strength to defend all we love.

Our gifts as Indigenous women are connected to our responsibilities as culture keepers. We, side by side in balance with our men, are caretakers of ceremony, story, and song. We carry and nurture traditional ecological knowledge and environmental

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philosophies for caring for land. Our responsibilities encompass teaching, healing and leadership. As women, we carry authority for decision making on behalf of all life and we raise our voices for all beings. As inhabitants of this land since time immemorial, we have a deep understanding of change and the resilience it demands. We have weathered the shifting winds of history both environmental and political. Despite extraordinary threats, we are still here, carrying the wisdom that was entrusted to us. Our traditional teachings have been key to our survival in times of change. As our world is poised on the brink of climate chaos, the time to listen and act on those teachings is upon us.

We acknowledge that every one of us bears responsibility for the injuries to Mother Earth. Collectively Indigenous peoples have contributed little to the causes of climate disruption, yet we are especially vulnerable to its consequences.

For us, climate change is more than an inconvenient truth. As Indigenous peoples, we are reliant on the gifts of land and water for subsistence and ceremony, our material and spiritual lives, as well as our health. Therefore, climate change threatens our very cultural survival.

We, the women of Maple Nation, raise our voices in response to these threats, on behalf of our beloved homelands and the generations yet to come. We will not stand idly by.

We commit ourselves to speak out on behalf of the wellbeing of Maple Nation, to take action to sustain the lands and waters that sustain us, and to support each other as we face these challenges. We will continue to lead our families, our communities and our Nations in resisting destruction and adapting to change.

We call upon our sisters, our brothers, all the peoples of Maple Nation and beyond to join us in this work guided by respect, reciprocity and reverence for generous Mother Earth who sustains us all.

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